

Key Issue

The 'Finch Report': the future is gold, but many challenges lie ahead

Four senior figures in academia and scholarly publishing were invited by the Editors of *Insights* to give their views on the recent 'Finch Group Report' (*Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications*), published in June 2012.

Two of these papers were published in the November 2012 issue of *Insights*, the first by Martin Hall, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Salford and a member of the Finch Group, whose paper is entitled: 'Green or gold? Open access after Finch.'

The second, 'What does Finch mean for researchers, librarians and publishers?' is by Steven Hall, CEO of IOP Publishing, and a member of the Finch Group.

Two further papers are published in this current issue of *Insights*. The first of these is by Stevan Harnad (Canada Research Chair in Cognitive Sciences, Département de psychologie, Université du Québec à Montréal and University of Southampton), whose paper has the title: 'Worldwide open access: UK leadership?'

The second, 'Open access: brave new world requires bravery', is by Stephen Curry, Professor of Structural Biology and Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of Life Sciences, Imperial College, London.

This Key Issue provides a brief overview of a number of the main views and comments presented by the authors in these four articles.

In the introduction to his paper, Martin Hall states that there is now a broad consensus that open access is the way of the future and that 'the debate is about the policies that are best suited to steering the transition'.

Steven Hall's succinct statement in his introduction, 'The preferred path is 'gold', not 'green'', hints at a sense of satisfaction with the Finch recommendations.

In his opening paragraphs, Stephen Curry comments that when delving into the idea of freeing up access to publicly funded research, you find yourself wading through an exhausting morass of competing elements and constituents. Unresolved conflicts, between these intertwined interests, he adds, 'explain why ... discussions on the achievement of a fully operational system of global open access remain fractured and fractious'. He adds later in his paper that it was '... a less radical and more compromised document than some had hoped for and so came as something of a reality check'. It favoured gold as the primary vehicle for access to UK research, and '... downplayed the ability of repositories to deliver green OA' (but he points out that RCUK, however, did make it clear that RCUK-funded authors and institutions may opt to make their research accessible using green OA repositories).

Stevan Harnad starts with a reminder to readers that since the beginning of the open access movement a decade ago, the UK has been its leader. However, he states that OA leadership has now 'been derailed by the joint influence of the publishing industry lobby ... and by well-intentioned but premature and unhelpful over-reaching from within the OA movement itself', with the result being 'the extremely counterproductive 'Finch Report' followed by a new draft of the Research Councils UK (RCUK) OA mandate, downgrading the role of cost-free OA self-archiving of research publications ('green OA') in favor of paying subscription publishers over and above subscriptions, out of scarce research funds'.



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Consultant

78 The authors comment on views expressed by other observers. Martin Hall points out that the Report has received criticisms, for example, for not proposing that publishers' prices be regulated. It is difficult, he states, to see how this could have been done, however, 'since there is no evident national mechanism for price control, let alone for the sort of international agreements that would be required, since many leading academic publishers are not based in Britain'. He adds that innovation and new business models could drive down publishing charges.

He gives other examples. David Price of UCL argued that Finch has got it only partially right and that the best course would be to stay with the present combination of green and subscription publishing, augmented by licence extensions, that would, for example, allow for 'free at point of use' access by the NHS. Second, Peter Suber criticized the Report, and the RCUK policy, for failing to take appropriate advantage of the opportunities that green repositories offer. Martin Hall adds that 'While he [Suber] agrees that gold (or, more accurately, full, up-front APCs [article processing charges] and CC-BY licences) is the objective, he stresses that funding agencies and universities should in the interim push for deposits in institutional and subject-area repositories'.

Responses to the Report and the RCUK policy have been mixed, Stephen Curry observes, with some seeing the preference for gold OA as a bold move. Others, he says, have cautioned that the policy risks undermining the utility of green OA repositories and panders too readily to the commercial interests of publishers. Concerns have also been expressed at the estimated costs involved. He believes more stakeholders need to get into the conversation about how to take OA forward, indicating that there has been vigorous debate across the blogosphere, 'but too many researchers have yet to find their way there'. Part of the blame for the slow uptake of debate, he says, might be laid at the doors of universities, which he feels have been relatively muted in their response to the Finch Report and the RCUK policy.

Addressing a view that argued that Finch's preference for gold risks preserving the commercial advantages of the companies that presently dominate the market, Stephen Curry indicates that he does not entirely share this view and welcomes a number of 'remarkable recent developments in OA publishing' that include two new OA journals: *PeerJ* and *eLife*, as well as the SCOAP3 initiative. He asks whether similar innovations in the humanities and social sciences can be expected. The response of these research communities to the latest policy developments has been slower off the mark, 'but appears extremely wary, if not downright confrontational'.

Steven Hall comments on the government's response to the report, listing five of the key Finch recommendations and the government's position on each of these. He expresses particular disappointment with the government's rejection of one recommendation ('*during the period of transition ... funds should be found to extend and rationalize current licences to cover all institutions in [the HE and health] sectors*'), and their refusal 'to make a penny of additional funding available for licence extensions which would make the world's research outputs – not just those of the UK – equally accessible throughout the whole of UK higher education and the health service'.

Addressing green OA aspects of the Report, Martin Hall indicates there is evidence that when research results are made freely available in repositories, rates of citation rise, but points to the limitations of green. For example, repositories do not contain everything and cannot contain the 'version of record' and barriers are posed for text and data mining that need to trawl the versions of record. These limitations are, he states, 'increasingly making the combination of green repositories and subscription publishing an unsatisfactory compromise and this compromise may also be keeping the costs of subscriptions (or licences) to academic journals artificially high'. The Finch Group, Martin Hall points out, sees repositories fulfilling a subsidiary but important role for the short to medium term, alongside open access journals and extensions to licensing, and adds, 'but it is important that they do so in a sustainable way, in the interests of the research communications system as a whole. But will require further investment in developing the UK-wide infrastructure of repositories'.

79 Stevan Harnad points out that most researchers (80%) in most fields do not make their articles OA, unless either their institutions or their funders mandate, and gives the reasons. He adds that 'institutions and funders cannot mandate that journals must convert from subscription publishing to gold OA publishing', adding, 'nor can institutions and funders dictate in which journal researchers should publish on the basis of the journal's business model, rather than the journal's track-record for quality'.

Stephen Curry stresses that the RCUK OA policy is not yet fixed in stone and the RCUK has made it clear that the research councils will review their policy after two years. Implicit in this end goal, he says, is the recognition that green OA is likely to play an important role. Although it is clear that the UK has struck out in a gold direction, Stephen Curry states it remains to be seen how well RCUK can keep to the course it has set.

Addressing the view that publication with a CC-BY licence will result in libraries cancelling journal subscriptions, Martin Hall indicates there is little evidence of this and that some feel the opposite could be the case, for example because journals often contain valuable editorial content that is additional to articles, and libraries need to have full runs of journals online, etc. Embargoes are important here – he states, 'In particular, public interest in publicly funded research must be that these restrictions are short-lived and perhaps no longer than six months'.

A further issue Stephen Curry includes in his paper is the importance of OA progress overseas. Developments in the US and EU, both of which currently seem more likely to follow green OA routes, are likely to be particularly influential, he believes, though attitudes to OA in China, India and Brazil should also be considered. Ultimately, he says, 'OA stands or falls as a workable ideal if the whole international community buys into it'.

The transition and the costs of APCs are addressed by the authors. Steven Hall comments on the potential total costs of APCs and RCUK's intention to provide 'block grants' to UK universities to pay the APCs. Using the average APC of £1,727 from the Finch modelling, and the RCUK estimate of 31,000 published papers it funded in 2010, he provides an estimate of a total cost of £53.5m. If RCUK were to commit to this level of funding, he says, it could be expected that the new policy be quickly implemented. If committing less than this, its uptake could be expected to be slower and more cumbersome. Even if all UK research funders, public and private, mandate open access publication, that will only cover around 6% of the world's research output, Steven Hall suggests, and 'it would require several other major countries to make the same commitment, for the balance to tip irrevocably towards an OA publishing model'.

Addressing criticism of the costs of the transition, Martin Hall points out that although the headline figure in the Finch Report is £50–£60m a year, this is a bundle of associated costs, with the estimate for the move to full APCs being £38m a year. [In his original article, which has now been amended, Martin Hall inadvertently quoted £28m based on an earlier draft of the Report.] If innovation does drive down the average costs of APCs and the rest of the world adopts full APC systems more quickly, annual costs will decline more rapidly, he anticipates. Referring to commissioned work modelling the implications of the transition from green to gold for four different kinds of universities, he indicates, 'once this inevitable transition is completed, all universities will have lower overall costs'.

Continuing the transition theme, a question Stephen Curry poses for green OA advocates is how to get to a fully effective system of OA where subscriptions are redundant, adding that the current relatively low take-up of green OA has meant that there has been no discernible impact on subscription income to publishers. But, he suggests, 'it is difficult to see how this situation is tenable in the long term if the goal is to make a global success of the OA project'. A transition via gold OA, though more costly in the short term, is more likely to foster an orderly process, Steven Curry states, but this approach is not without its problems. The Finch Report has been criticized for pandering too much to the interests of publishers and he adds that Finch herself has acknowledged that her brief included instruction not to damage the publishing industry.

80 He makes the specific suggestion that in refashioning scholarly communications, there should be a move away from dependence on journal impact factors as crude and cruel measures of research performance. 'The ongoing addiction to impact factors acts as a brake on developments in OA since it gives the whip hand to established journals and inhibits the entry of new players into the publishing market.'

Steven Hall considers the possible implications of the Report on stakeholders – the title of his paper. In an OA environment, authors will become publishers' main customers. 'Publishers will spend less on services to libraries and readers, and more on services to authors', he suggests. They will also need to ensure their back-office systems can support OA publishing and to adapt their copyright policies. The most significant consequence may be on peer review, he says, indicating that 'It would be disastrous if, as open access grows, it were to be conflated with 'light-touch' or 'low-threshold' peer review, simply on the basis that the costs are lower; high-quality UK research deserves high-quality peer review and publishing'.

If the cost of APCs is fully met by RCUK and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Steven Hall feels there is likely to be little impact on librarians, other than in any role that they might play in the administration of the APC funds. If universities have to pay some of the costs, that money would need to be found from other parts of their budgets. Hall points out that the cost of journal subscriptions and licences could fall in proportion to the growth of OA publication, and if all UK research were eventually published on an OA basis, subscription and licence charges might be expected to fall by around 6%, the UK's share of research outputs. This, he feels, would save UK academic libraries only around £7m on their current journal acquisition costs.

UK researchers will feel the impact of the new policies most keenly, Steven Hall states, as they will need to take into consideration the OA policies of their preferred journals when submitting articles for publication. He ponders how a dominant OA model might change the nature of scholarly journals and the interaction of researchers with them: 'Will the author-pays model, especially if it is inadequately funded, lead authors to choose the cheapest option, foregoing copy-editing and giving up rigorous pre-publication peer review in favour of a post-publication peer review which has yet to be shown to work?'

Much of Stevan Harnad's paper focuses on the new RCUK OA policy. Commenting on the UK's resolve 'to make all of its research output OA within two years', this, he proposes, could be accomplished by upgrading the existing RCUK (2012) green OA mandate with a compliance verification mechanism that would include, among other conditions:

- all articles must be deposited immediately upon acceptance for publication ...
- deposit must be in the institutional repository, not institution-external ...
- repository deposit needs to be designated as the sole mechanism for submitting publications for research assessment ...

Stevan Harnad then goes on to address specific points in RCUK's new OA policy, describing it as 'designed with the aim of inducing journals either to convert to gold OA or to reduce their green OA embargoes (if they wish to keep publishing the UK's 6% of world research output)'

The mandate, he writes, 'forbids RCUK authors to publish in a journal unless it either offers libre gold OA (with a CC-BY license) or green OA (with an embargo of no more than 6–12 months)'. Libre gold is defined by Stevan Harnad in the list of definitions he includes in his article as 'free online access, webwide, plus various re-use rights (such as data mining, remix and republication rights)'. He points out that these definitions '... once defined, can be quickly put together to explain the problem with the RCUK policy flaw, as well as the solution'.

He adds that the RCUK mandate includes a 'highly ambiguous clause which seems to indicate that if the journal offers both the libre gold and 6–12 green, the RCUK author may

81 only choose the (paid) gold option, not the (free) green option'. The clause, he says, has consequences which were not noticed by the RCUK and adds, '... it provides subscription journals with an irresistible incentive to offer hybrid gold OA as an added option, at an added cost, and to increase their green embargoes beyond RCUK's limit'.

Why? Because, he explains, a journal stands to enhance its total income by, in his example 6%, by simply offering a hybrid gold OA option. And, he adds, 'to make sure RCUK authors must pick the gold option, the journal need merely raise any green OA embargo to at least 13+'.

Nor, he feels, did the RCUK reckon with the prospect of author resistance to restrictions on their choice of journal, and outrage at having to choose the paid-gold option over green.

Stevan Harnad goes on to say, 'the most important perverse consequence that RCUK failed to anticipate was the global effect that encouraging publishers to offer hybrid gold OA and to lengthen their green embargoes, would have on green OA mandates'.

'All this can be very easily remedied', Stevan Harnad suggests, and he proposes firstly that the RCUK must drop the requirement to choose gold over green when both are offered and second, the RCUK should implement a compliance verification mechanism.

The authors conclude their articles with some final thoughts:

Martin Hall states that debates will continue as this is a complex area with many uncertainties, but that the larger picture is clear: 'we are headed for an open access world that will replace traditional subscription publishing with systems of distributing new knowledge that are far more appropriate to the immense opportunities of new digital technologies'.

Whilst making it clear that he supports the widest possible access to research outputs and that open access publication funded by APCs is a perfectly viable and sustainable model for scholarly publishing, Steven Hall expresses concerns, however, about the possible danger of fundamental damage to the process of scholarly communications 'through an over-emphasis on cost reduction'.

The goal of open access may be widely shared, Stephen Curry says, but the road ahead remains tortuous. The prize is worth striving for, he adds, but there are few easy answers. 'The only thing I am certain of is that there are many arguments ahead. I hope that we can approach them with open minds'.

Stevan Harnad concludes his paper with the brief statement: 'With the simple modification of the RCUK policy described here, the UK can continue to lead the way to global OA'.

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To access the four articles discussed in this Key Issue, all published by UKSG in *Insights*:

Martin Hall – Green or gold? Open access after Finch: <http://bit.ly/Z5jsgT>

Steven Hall – What does Finch mean for researchers, librarians and publishers?: <http://bit.ly/1560WFu>

Stevan Harnad – Worldwide open access: UK leadership?: this issue, pp. 14–21: <http://bit.ly/XNWsAm>

Stephen Curry – Open access: brave new world requires bravery: this issue, pp. 22–27: <http://bit.ly/UPj6sc>

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